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ABSTRACT

A permanent, ongoing relationship between the technical writing faculty at Ohio State University (OSU) and the technical writing staff at Battelle Memorial Institute, the world's largest independent research and development laboratory, holds advantages for both. Four formal programs of cooperation currently exist: Battelle staff members serve as guest lecturers in OSU technical writing classes, the Battelle Proposal Writing Center is committed to hiring OSU technical writing students as interns, members of the Proposal Center staff grade and comment on a single set of student-written reports for each OSU faculty member interested in participating, and students enrolled in the basic OSU technical writing course have an opportunity to tour Battelle's Columbus laboratories. Informal interaction has included a one-time Battelle seminar on writing, a jointly sponsored lecture series, and a two-day conference for high school teachers on technical writing. Through such a relationship, OSU teachers gain confidence that what they are teaching is representative of what students will be required to do, and Battelle personnel have an up-to-date source of information on writing theory. (Suggestions for developing a similar program are included.) (TJ)

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The Role of a Private Research Foundation in a Technical Writing Program

As technical writing teachers, we have for many years been encouraging each other to reach out to business and industry in order that we might gain a better sense of the kinds of work that our students will be doing. One point often implicit in most of our appeals has been that the greater the variety of our extra-university activity the greater its value to us.

I'd like to suggest that while variety of experience is indeed useful, a single, enduring relationship can provide rich rewards of a different sort. I shall use as my text the relationship between Battelle Memorial Institute and the Ohio State University. Specifically, I shall focus on the interaction among members of Battelle's Proposal Writing Center and OSU's technical writing faculty. After a brief description of the two organizations, I shall describe specific areas of cooperation and the rewards to those who participate. I shall conclude by suggesting how this kind of cooperation might be fostered elsewhere.

Gordon Battelle, an Ohio steel manufacturer, provided in his Will for an institute "to benefit mankind by the advancement and utilization of science through technological innovation and educational activities." Forty-nine years after its founding, Battelle Memorial is the world's largest independent research and development lab. In 1977, Battelle staff

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members engaged in research and development on 2,694 projects carried out under contracts with 1,663 industrial and government sponsors in 30 countries. Recent projects have ranged from development of artificial tooth roots to design of equipment for reclaiming stripmined land; from development of techniques for decontaminating metal surfaces to design of systems to promote vertical growth of strawberries in controlled environments. More to our point, perhaps, is that in 1977 Battelle staff members were authors of 18 books, wrote 890 papers and articles, and received patents for 110 inventions. With labs in Richland, Washington, Geneva, Switzerland, and Frankfurt, Germany, Battelle maintains its largest facility and base of operations in Columbus, Ohio.

It is at the Columbus facility that a group of seven to ten people is responsible for providing support for the writing and dissemination of proposals. Their Center, a department within Battelle's marketing division, is located in the Institute's headquarters building, on land immediately adjacent to the Ohio State University.

OSU, a land-grant school opened in 1870, now boasts the largest student population on any single campus in the country. This size has made possible programs at all degree levels in fields as diverse as metallurgical engineering and neo-natal nursing. A junior-level technical writing course is now required of all bachelor's candidates in the College of Engineering and is highly recommended by the School of Agriculture and Home Economics. To meet the demand, the technical writing faculty, in the English department, has slowly expanded to include eight full-time teachers and eight to ten part-time teachers. In addition, a senior-and graduate-level technical writing course and a business writing course will be added to the curriculum

soon.

The emerging cooperative effort between the OSU technical writing faculty and the members of the Proposal Center is nourished by the symbiotic relationship that has long existed between the two parent organizations. The libraries of each institution, for example, have long been available to members of the neighboring facility. Battelle scientists have for many years found the pursuit of advanced degrees at OSU advantageous, and OSU faculty from many different departments have often been invited to Battelle to lecture or provide in-house training. In addition, Battelle, though itself an aggressive seeker of grants, is, by the dictates of Gordon Battelle's Will, a donor of funds for community and educational services. Ohio State has been a chief beneficiary of such funds through Battelle grants to the American Society for Engineering Education, the Ohio Academy of Science, and the Ohio State University Development Fund.

Cooperation between members of Battelle's Proposal Center and the OSU technical writing faculty began informally as the result of mutual membership in the Central Ohio Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). The exchange of ideas at our monthly dinner meetings proved so rewarding that it seemed wasteful not to establish formal, on-going programs of cooperation. Four such programs now exist.

The first program involves guest lectures by Battelle people in technical writing classes. Although various members of the Proposal Center have indicated various specific subjects of interest, most of the lectures are scheduled to coincide with class discussions of proposals. The anecdotes guest lecturers can provide reinforce what the teacher has said about the importance of proposals. The mere mention by a Proposal Center member

that his department is part of the Marketing Division of Battelle says more to students about the sales function of a proposal than any text ever could. In the future, the guest lecture program should expand to make possible participation by the Proposal Center people in the English Department Guest Lecture Series. Here Battelle people would doubtless speak on topics of broader interest, and, it is hoped, help draw the writing and literature faculties of the English Department closer together.

The second program, still in its infancy, commits the Proposal Center to hiring OSU technical writing students as interns. Though but one intern was hired this past quarter, the Proposal Center hopes within a year or two to have work and funding for as many as five students each term. Students will be selected by the technical writing faculty on the basis of their performance in the technical writing course and their interest in careers in technical writing or science journalism. Participants in the program will enroll simultaneously for two hours of Independent Study credit at the university and will be supervised by a technical writing faculty member in writing reports related to the work experience at Battelle.

The third program involves members of the Proposal Center staff in the grading and commentary of a single set of reports for each faculty member interested in participating. According to the plan, a faculty member and a Battelle staff member make arrangements that suit their time and needs, but typically the member of the Proposal Center volunteers to write brief evaluations of one or two sets of student proposals each term. Though the teacher ultimately assigns the grade, students are naturally very interested in what a professional writer has to say about their work. When students know in advance that their work will receive something more

than academic scrutiny, they seem to rise to the occasion with redoubled effort.

Program Four, now in the final planning stages, will provide every student enrolled in the basic technical writing course a chance to tour Battelle's Columbus laboratories. Here the technical writing faculty and the Proposal Center staff have sought the help of Battelle's Public Relations division in organizing a tour that will stress writing as a tangible product. Though security regulations under which Battelle must operate will preclude access to many areas of the Lab, we hope it will be possible to follow a project from the Request for Proposal, through the Proposal, actual lab investigations and progress reports, to the final report. At each stage, we hope some of those who have worked on it will be able to comment on the writing they have done in connection with the project. Because as many as 300 students may be involved each term, the expense in time away from the job for Battelle personnel may yet require modification of these plans. But Battelle's willingness even to consider such an invasion is gratifying proof of their commitment to technical writing.

While these four programs provide a formal bond between the Proposal Center and the Technical Writing faculty, informal interaction continues to generate new ideas. One of these resulted in a one-time Battelle seminar on writing, for all OSU faculty; another led to a jointly-sponsored lecture series on science and the humanities; and yet another precipitated a two-day conference for high school teachers on technical writing in the pre-college curriculum.

The advantages to both partners in this relationship are many. Battelle people find interaction with technical writing faculty helps keep them

abreast of developments in technical writing theory. Since many members of the Proposal Center backed into technical writing from other fields, they lack the training in rhetoric which the technical writing faculty can provide. In addition, Battelle staff members pride themselves on the community service they render by their close associaiton with Ohio State, and gratitude for their altruism is not diminished by the knowledge that by their help in improving the technical writing program at OSU they almost assure themselves a large pool of well-trained writers upon which to draw for their needs.

The advantages to a technical writing teacher of close association with practioners of the trade have been well documented.[1] Not often mentioned, though, is the general confidence a teacher gains that what he or she is asking of students is in fact representative of what they will be required to do in their careers. This confidence seems crucial in a course that demands a good deal of simulation, that is, development of hypothetical contexts and roles for student writing. Many OSU faculty attribute their ability to spawn examples in an instant to answer a student's question about diverse audiences, or about job applications, or proposals, or any related matter directly to their exposure to Battelle's diverse operations.

Because the cooperation is on-going, participants are coming to trust one another in ways that those involved in shorter cooperative ventures usually don't. That trust makes easier the sharing of the inglorious, the boring, the frustrating moments that are typical of our chosen fields of specialization.

For technical writing faculty, the very duration of the relationship makes possible a glimpse of a wide variety of Battelle operations and a deep understanding of the writing tasks undertaken by Battelle personnel.

And for Battelle people, there is the security of a standing source of up-to-date information on writing theory.

Not least among the benefits cited by both Battelle and Ohio State University people is the general camaraderie that has resulted from their cooperation. Students, I believe, are not insensitive to the pleasure their teachers take in this joint venture, and by the grapevine, word of our good cheer perhaps favorably affects enrollment in our courses.

We ought to note, however, that all of this joy and rapture in Columbus is of little meaning to most of us unless similar results be achievable in our own programs, which are not typically located in the shadows of major research foundations. Therefore, I shall conclude with some suggestions on how to find, court, and marry a partner for programs similar to those I have just described.

Begin by reading those who have had something to say about their dealings beyond the academy walls. Foremost among these are Paul Anderson in "Teaching the Teacher What Government and Industry Want From Technical Writing,"[2] Deborah Andrews in "The Continuing Education Course: A Technical Writing Teacher's Field Work and Professional Responsibility,"[3] and J. C. Mathes in "Designing an In-House Professional Writing Course."[4] These, above all, will help you understand what a business or foundation may be looking for in you and what you may reasonably be able to offer.

Next, zero in on a prospect of modest, but not self-effacing size, preferably wealthy, and with a public image to uphold. A local office of a national or multi-national firm may fill the bill, expecially if that office is sufficiently large to have a few personnel charged primarily with technical writing. At North Carolina State University at Raleigh,

where I now teach, branch facilities of IBM and Rockwell International are likely candidates. If the membership rolls of the local STC chapter provide you no leads, the yellow pages of the phone book will prove useful. In addition, your students, whose work experience might be quite extensive, may gladly serve as matchmaker for you.

On first approaching a company, request assistance of a very limited nature, perhaps advice on an up-coming curricular issue. If you unfold your elaborate plan too quickly, you may well scare your contact away. I urge a request for help rather than an offer of assistance because the former is likely to be considered flattering, while the latter may be seen as an insult or indictment of incompetence.

You will need to remember, though, that the four programs in Columbus which I have described have taken three years from initial planning to start-up. And behind that planning are twenty years of informal interaction. Do not be dismayed, then, if the programs you would like to institute with an outside organization are slow aborning. For, according to the personnel of Battelle's Proposal Center and Ohio State's Technical Writing Faculty, the rewards of patience are many.

Notes

[1] See, for example, John A. Muller, "What Consultation and Freelance Writing Can Do For You and For Your Students." TWT, 5 (Spring, 1978), pp. 74-77.

[2] Technical and Professional Communication, ed. Thomas M. Sawyer (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Professional Communication Press, Inc., 1977), pp. 65-78.

[3] Proceedings of the 25th International Technical Communication Conference, Dallas, 1978 (Washington: Society for Technical Communication), pp. 381-383.

[4] Proceedings of the 24th International Technical Communication Conference, Chicago, 1977 (Washington: Society for Technical Communication), pp. 94-101.